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*The Comparative Impact of Critical Reading and Explicit Vocabulary  
Instruction on EFL Learners' Vocabulary Learning and Retention*

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## **Abstract**

This experimental study was an endeavor to investigate if explicit vocabulary instruction and critical reading have any superiority over each other in terms of their impact on vocabulary learning and retention among Iranian EFL learners. To serve the purpose of this study, 62 upper-intermediate level male and female students selected through an FCE test and a vocabulary test, were divided into two groups, each including 31 members to receive two types of treatment. One group experienced explicit instruction of vocabulary items and the other received critical reading treatment. Another piloted vocabulary test parallel to the previous one was administered to them twice, once immediately after the treatment and the other after a month interval to evaluate the students' learning and retention respectively. Statistic analyses on their scores manifested that there was a significant change in the vocabulary scores across the three different time periods, sharply ascending at first, and subsequently descending. However, there was no significant difference in the vocabulary scores of the two groups which verified the null hypothesis. Therefore, teaching critical reading strategies and explicit instruction both proved to impressively affect vocabulary learning and in a lower rate vocabulary retention while having comparatively no significant difference.

**Dedicated to my parents**

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# **C H A P T E R I**

## ***BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE***

## **1.1. Introduction**

The irrefutable importance of vocabulary learning and retention has always been both language teachers and learners' concern since some researchers have even considered the words we use as an inseparable part of our personality traits. According to Stahl (2005, p.95), “To a large extent, the words we know and use are who we are. Words can define, to the outside world (and maybe even to ourselves), how smart we are (or think we are), what kinds of jobs we do, and what our qualifications for jobs might be”. What is more, sometimes meanings of the words can convey much more than we think (Harmer, 1991).

The significance of vocabulary acquisition is also clearly reflected in the increasing number of studies made in the last two decades in this area of research (Meara, 2002). Since words are the building blocks of language and having a good supply of them is very important for students' right from the beginning of their English learning. Harmer (1992, p.14) describes what the native speakers know about vocabulary. He emphasizes that competent speakers know what the words mean (both literally and metaphorically).

To many learners, and even some instructors, language learning is synonymous with memorization of a myriad of words. Although this does not hold true, we should not forget that words constitute a major part of any language (Bogaards, 2001; Nation, 1997; Sokmen, 1997). In this respect, Morimoto and Loewen (2007) suggest that a mastery of 3000 words is needed

for successful language learning, while others such as Schmitt (2008) believe that a large vocabulary of 5000 –7000 word families for oral discourse is required to function in English.

In an analysis of a corpus from a selection of extensive readers, Nation and Wang (1999) showed that after the most frequent words have been learned, subsequent progress becomes much more difficult.

However, it has been found that higher vocabulary makes it easier to make sense of text (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). All these arguments lay emphasis on the importance of exploring effective techniques of vocabulary instruction.

Research shows that "vocabulary is the glue that holds stories, ideas, and content together and that it facilitates making comprehension accessible for children" (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999, p. 5). Research links vocabulary knowledge with reading comprehension and fluency. Several "factor analytic studies document that vocabulary knowledge is an important predictor of reading comprehension" (Flood et. al., 1991, p. 608) and "intuitively it makes sense that teaching children word meaning will improve their comprehension. Laflamme (1997) states that "researchers have acclaimed vocabulary knowledge as the single most important factor in reading comprehension" (p. 1). In addition to comprehension, vocabulary knowledge increases reading skills. Ediger (1999) discovered "one reason that pupils do not read well is that they do not possess a functional vocabulary for reading" (p. 1). In fact the words of a

struggling reader, "I know a lot more words now, and it's easier to read," (Robb, 1997, p. 34) attests to this fact. Reading fluency and text comprehension necessitate vocabulary instruction. Language learners need to acquire all mentioned features of vocabulary. Not only words themselves but they must learn vocabulary in context. Words do not just exist on their own: they live with other words, and they depend upon each other (Harmer, 1992).

Since acquiring vocabulary incidentally through reading in context fosters an elaborate processing of words and facilitates its retention in memory (Huchin & Bloch, 1993; Nation, 1990; Schouten-Van Parreren, 1992), teaching the learners how to read more efficiently in order to boost their vocabulary knowledge is a crucial factor which could not be disregarded.

Munro (2002) states that when students learn words explicitly they are more likely to understand the topic. He suggests that in teaching word meanings that students should use the context in which the word is used to work out its meaning instead of a dictionary and that they should check their understanding of a word's meaning through examples and suggest what the word doesn't mean. He emphasizes that students require help to learn word meanings through explicit context relevant teacher processes.

Reading effectively requires approaching texts with a critical eye; evaluating what you read for not just *what* it says, but *how* and *why* it says it.

To non-critical readers, texts provide facts. Readers gain knowledge by memorizing the statements within a text. To the critical reader, any single text provides but one portrayal of the facts, one individual's "take" on the subject matter. Critical readers thus recognize not only *what* a text says, but also *how* that text portrays the subject matter. They recognize the various ways in which each and every text is the unique creation of a unique author (Kurland, 2000).

Consequently, considering the significance of vocabulary retention through context and merits of critical reading, the impact of this reading style on vocabulary learning is worth examining.

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study**

The abundance of studies focusing on the vocabulary knowledge of EFL students and its impacts on their language proficiency demonstrates how crucial this sub-skill is. Vocabulary levels of the learners are also found to be closely correlated with their language proficiency (Nation & Maera, 2002): the higher the proficiency levels, the more vocabulary knowledge (Laufer & Nation, 1999; Fan, 2000; Vidal, 2003) and the higher the vocabulary size the learners have, the better they are in reading comprehension (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; cited in Laufer, 1997, 1998; Nagy, 1988; 2005; Stahl, 1999; Zhang & Annual, 2008). Vocabulary knowledge has been found to be the most crucial factor in

interpretation of what has been read (Laufer & Sim, 1985). Vocabulary knowledge is found to be a key factor in productive skills. Vocabulary size is also a good predictor of writing quality (Astika, 1993; cited in Laufer, 1998).

Some EFL learners strive to memorize new words through repetition. For that, they take a list of words arranged alphabetically in front of themselves and try to learn them through mere repetition. Since this kind of learning has been called rote learning, it could not answer all learners' needs.

The distinction between implicit learning and explicit learning has long been an area of interest for SLA researchers and theoreticians. Implicit learning is the acquisition of knowledge that takes place naturally, simply, and without conscious operations. Explicit learning is a conscious operation wherein the learner makes and test hypotheses about the target language (N.C. Ellis, 1994).

Krashen (1991) allows that both explicit and implicit learning take place, but denies that there is any interface between the two; explicit, conscious learning cannot be converted into acquisition.

In this study, the comparison of explicit learning and implicit learning in order to figure out which one should be prior to the other is not the issue. The problem is the negligence of EFL learners in trying different methods of vocabulary learning.

By concentrating on vocabulary learning through repetition, EFL learners fail to learn how to use the learned words while speaking and writing. They may



also be unsuccessful using the proper collocations and even the correct use of the learned words.

In addition, learning through repetition is not everlasting and would be gone after a period of time. Therefore, finding the most proper method for vocabulary learning and retention would be so challenging for both teachers and learners.

The purpose of this paper aims to study the comparative impact of critical reading and explicit vocabulary instruction, as two well-known methods, on EFL learners' vocabulary learning and retention.

### **1.3. Statement of Research Questions**

This study examines the effects of two types of input on EFL learners' vocabulary learning and retention:

- 1. Is there any significant difference in the effect of explicit vocabulary instruction and critical reading on the EFL learners' vocabulary learning?*
- 2. Is there any significant difference in the effect of explicit vocabulary instruction and critical reading on the EFL learners' vocabulary retention?*
- 3. Does critical reading affect the EFL learners' retention significantly?*
- 4. Does explicit vocabulary instruction affect the EFL learners' retention significantly?*

## 1.4. Statement of Research Hypotheses

These null hypotheses had been developed in order to answer the above-mentioned research questions:

**H0<sub>1</sub>:** *There is no significant difference in the effect of explicit vocabulary instruction and critical reading on the EFL learners' vocabulary learning.*

**H0<sub>2</sub>:** *There is no significant difference in the effect of explicit vocabulary instruction and critical reading on the EFL learners' vocabulary retention.*

**H0<sub>3</sub>:** *Critical reading does not affect the EFL learners' retention significantly.*

**H0<sub>4</sub>:** *Explicit vocabulary instruction does not affect the EFL learners' retention significantly.*

## 1.5. Significance of the Study

All of us read different articles for different reasons. We may find an innumerable number of new words inside these articles but what percentages of them are kept in our mind? What percentages of them have the possibility to be repeated in other texts?

In fact, well-developed vocabulary and reading comprehension skills are central to success on the standardized tests used in most states with students' promotion to higher grades directly at stake. Harmer (1993) states that if language structure makes up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that

provides the vital organs and flesh. Vocabulary knowledge is an essential part of literacy skills (Pulido & Hambrick 2008).

A number of experimental studies have attempted to demonstrate how negotiation of input and output can aid comprehension and lead to increase production of quality output, reflecting a more advanced stage of acquisition (Ellis & He 1999, Macky & Philips 1998). Vocabulary appears in two main ways; reading questions that directly test vocabulary and comprehension questions that require strong vocabulary knowledge.

This list gives an overview of the importance of vocabulary to some of the most widely used standardized tests of reading, including:

- National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)
- California Standards Test – English-Language Arts
- Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT3)
- New York English Language Arts
- Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)
- Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)

Therefore, it is really desirable for all to keep most of the new words they learn for a longer time. For that reason, this ability could be much more crucial for EFL learners who want to keep a higher range of vocabularies in their mind.

Knowing how to read articles critically or how to learn new words explicitly in order to add the word knowledge and keep them up for a longer time into the

mind could be a momentous advantage for an EFL teacher in order to motivate his/her students to read more and to demonstrate them how to economize on time by wasting less time and acquiring more knowledge.

## 1.6. Definition of key Terms

**Critical reading:** critical reading **is reading** in which the reader reacts critically to what he or she is reading, through relating the content of the reading material to personal standards, values, attitudes or beliefs (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

To critically analyze a text, different steps in the form of strategies were introduced by Sousa (2004, pp. 105-106) which include previewing, contextualizing, questioning, reflecting, outlining and summarizing, evaluating an argument, and comparing and contrasting related readings.

**Explicit instruction:** Explicit instruction is a systematic instructional approach that includes a set of delivery and design procedures derived from effective schools research merged with behavior analysis. There are two essential components to well-designed explicit instruction: (a) visible **delivery features** are group instruction with a high level of teacher and student interactions, and (b) the less observable, *instructional design principles* and assumptions that make up the content and strategies to be taught. (Hall, 2002)